

# ORPHANED COMPUTERS & GAME SYSTEMS

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This issue is kind of a milestone for us. It is about twice the size of previous issues, but it took much less effort. Chris and I have hit full swing with our abilities to communicate what we have to say to readers. There is nothing quite like sitting and working on a project together. My enthusiasm for gaming and collecting has come to mean much more to me since I met Chris.

But there is more to the hobby than two guys playing games. It is about friendship, conversation and taunting. Chris might say, "Yeah, you *are* better at *Warlords* than me, but how about we play a game of *Doom*!" I would not really have a response to that either, since he is better at *Doom*. I can only hope that somehow I can talk him into playing *Doom* with Paddles. ("Oh, it is so much easier that way -- try it," I will say.)

Editing and writing this newsletter exposes both Chris and I to people we would not meet otherwise. At a local video game store, Replay Games, I spoke to someone who'd received a plaque for beating *Raiders Of the Lost Ark*. Ideas get bounced around with other people as well. I've been thinking about creating a compilation of Bally Astrocade games on CD that could be loaded into the *Bally BASIC* cartridge. This is an idea that I have received some support for, but more input is needed from users of the Bally. (Next issue will have more details about this.)

This has been a great issue to put together. Chris did great work with all of his articles, as is usual, but pay close attention to his article "Making Worlds." He makes it seem as though anyone can make a game. And, after all, isn't he right? I am especially proud of my son's input in this issue. He plays games more than I do, and his opinions count very highly to me. The other reviews in this issue are dedicated to late Atari 2600 releases that we think deserve special attention.

You will also find Chris's game solutions and Easter eggs. Chris makes it his personal duty to show me every Easter egg he finds. I do not have the patience to search them out. Chris does all of the hard work for me; I get to reap the benefits. Aren't I a jerk? The Atari 5200 and ColecoVision comparison is not unique, as similar comparisons were made when the systems were released. But fifteen years of hindsight can lend great insights. (Too bad hindsight and foresight together are like double-negatives -- totally useless...)

Enjoy!

-- AT

There are three things that I love to do enough to justify wasting space in an editorial to mention them. One is playing music. Gotta get that out of the way.

The next one's playing video games with Adam. You really have to find someone who has the same sort of past gaming

fascination as you to connect on a 4k level. There's nothing like sitting there for a few hours, not worrying about anything but playing Atari; just having a ball picking games and playing them.

Sometimes we pick 8-bit games (like the *Pitfall II* excursion we bragged about last ish). Sometimes we network our PlayStations and spend hours in *Doom*-land together. Anyway, this all threw me for a loop, because from my mid-'teens (mid-eighties-ish) through to the age of 25, it was a solitary experience for me. So it's like I've discovered all of these new games (the two-player cooperative mode in *Joust*, etc.).

The third thing that's more fun than anything is sitting there coding and listening to the soundtrack of *Tron*. Wendy Carlos (of *A Clockwork Orange* soundtrack fame, as Adam informed me) composed it, and it's beautiful music in its own right, but it starts all the old, overtly enthusiastic synapses firing and keeps me in the mood to program, and program *well*. I don't need such a sensory catalyst, but it makes it *so* much fun. In this hearty double-issue somewhere, you'll find an article about my age-old fascination with *Tron*. Anyway, enjoy the super-sized stack of syntax you hold in your appreciative appendages, and enjoy the Atari convention (if you're going, which we are -- nyah nyah!).

-- CF

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If you received this issue free, think about sending a buck for the next one. Suggestions are always welcome. What subjects would you like covered?

**If you want to contribute**, send us some stuff or e-mail text files to us. We love having other writers.

## Okay, Spit It Out: What Exactly Is It About Old Games Vs. New, Anyway?

by Chris Federico

It's not that I don't like certain newer games. But I return over and over again to the 2600 or 7800. I get excited constantly about plugging in the Commodore 64 or Atari 8-bit. I often crave igniting the ColecoVision. The fascination for classics, the pure enjoyment and coordinational release I get from playing them, will never fade.

Is it all nostalgia? Do I solely retain an obsession initialized by the novelty of newness I experienced as a kid?

Nope.

There's something about a classic game that appeals to the player on a primal level. Older contests used graphics merely as a vehicle for communicating the action. Therefore, they didn't have to be decorative. A good game directly addresses the player's synapses instead of appealing to his sense of fashion.

Having said that, really good graphics in an old game could add atmosphere and intrigue, but the only reason meticulous visuals were fun was that, in the case of an inherently good game, they weren't needed. It was an almost entirely separate thing to be impressed by. What Activision's programmers did with 4k proportionally beat the hell out of any 10-meg, scanned-in backdrop I can see on the back of the latest bestselling game's carton.

Take away the multicolored, jagged platforms in *Joust* and replace them with straight, single-hued lines. Replace the pretty lava with solid red filling, and make the birds one color apiece, stripping them of their

detailed wings. Do you still a good game? Yup. The 2600 version proves it. The basic rules and mechanics of the game appeal to a human to the point of panic; his mind is being addressed on a raw, direct level, and the game is fun in and of itself. But replace the scenery and cute animation in *Crash Bandicoot* with single-colored, basic shapes, and you have a dull driving-type game with no visceral appeal.

The glow of the razor-sharp vector display on a *Star Castle* or *Tempest* coin-op screen excites and frightens me on levels untouched by the artistically complex castle in *Super Mario 64*. The older approach to graphics and direct game mechanics engages one's emotions. The original *Asteroids* graphics are mean, merciless and deadly. The cold bluish-white challenges one's psychological strengths.

The only reason a raster screen like that in *Pac-Man* was considered decorative was that it worked around the expected harsh lines of the boxes that made up the maze. The cute characters existed *despite* the scientific, computed reality in which they were housed, rather than existing *as part of* a world made to look as un-electronic as possible (no fun!). The whole approach to games now starts with the graphics, and as a result you're not engaged on a primal level that directly depends on the way your character moves in relation to the enemies. You're wrapped up in the cartoons.

If I want to be surrounded by a world in which all of the imaginative details are filled-in for me, I have plenty of modern options. Hell, some days are like that. But today I want to feel like I'm *playing*, dammit, sweaty palms and all. So unwrap the cord from around the 2600. I have a craving to fulfill. -- CF



## The Artistic Science Of Game Design

by Chris Federico

Some of you may recall my griping in an article I did for *Video Magic* about not being able to locate a copy of *Garry Kitchen's GameMaker* for the Commodore 64. I'd had that Activision tool on disk since it came out in 1985, and I finally learned how to take full advantage of its coding freedom by the early 90s. In 1995, however, my disk stopped loading, which broke my heart. Well, I'm happy to say that I recently acquired it again. Adam had it! Do you believe that? He'd thought that his disk didn't work. I took it home and tried loading it anyway, and up popped the title screen!

Needless to say, I immediately made several backup copies using some protection-defying utilities I'd incidentally obtained after the death of my first *GameMaker*. I have no ethical qualms about this; Adam's disk is an Activision original, I initially owned an original, and I intend to use the backups as personal safety copies only. I'm so glad to have this application again. I've already completed a new contest to add to my line of "Classic-Style Games." It's called *Tyrant*. I'm thrilled; it came out great.

Now, just in case some of you are thinking, "He thinks he's **programming**? He's only using a game construction kit!" I should briefly explain what *GameMaker* is. It's a quartet of applications: a sprite editor that allows for multiple frames and multicolor mode, a full-screen drawing

program that allows for the creation of background scenery, a versatile sound editor that takes full advantage of the C-64's SID (Sound Interface Device) chip, and a song-building application (the one I use the least; some of you know what my opinion is on music in video games). The heart of *GameMaker* is the editor, a blank slate on which you code. You load in the sprite files, etc. that you made, and then you draw from the pull-down list of dozens of commands to manipulate those separately created elements however you wish -- animation speeds, reactions to joystick movement, events upon collision, etc. You fill-in the variables, values, and so on.

If only it were that simple. But these are actual instructions you're piecing together; to get anywhere at all with *GameMaker*, you have to know how to **program**, baby. It's not for people who've never studied a language. It's like extended BASIC, with some of the POKes turned into easier commands like `SPRITE 1 X POSITION = 91`. Picture a mega-BASIC that runs as fast as machine language and leaves absolutely everything up to the programmer as if he were utilizing an actual language. You have to calculate everything very minutely, anticipating every possible event and orchestrating every split-second. I would never have been able to tackle *GameMaker* if I hadn't already been writing BASIC programs for a few years, feeling out the nuances of coding and learning memory-saving tricks like implementing flag variables and whatnot.

Anyway, on with the actual article. There are three phases to designing a game, and although the first phase is the most fun, that and the second are

both fun in separate ways. The third is the nightmare.

The first part of coming up with a game is the part that even non-programmers can do. In fact, it's the part I completed over and over as a kid, inventing video games merely by drawing the screens and devising the plots. Phase one consists of writing out the rules, drawing a picture of the tentative screen layout, making notes about the object of the game (even if it's just "Shoot the bad guys and avoid getting shot yourself"), and then going a little further and deciding exactly how many characters and items will be in the game, what their functions are, what sort of control the player has over his character and so forth. Finally, this pre-coding phase usually necessitates the designation of variables, so that you have a written reference to glance at while you're scrutinizing your code for debugging or change-making.

There are a few things to take into consideration while you're turning an abstract idea into a fixed set of rules, especially if you're planning on passing the game out to your friends or making it somehow available on the 'Net. First of all, what sort of game do **you** like to play? What would you have liked to see on a C-64 software shelf when that computer was in vogue (or whatever platform you're writing for)? In other words, what game seems like it would be a lot of fun to play, but was never available?

There's usually one major twist to each exciting idea, even if the setting and mechanics fit into one or more of the popular classic categories. *Fast Food's* twist is that you have to hunt for and pick up your ammo. *Dig-Dug* and *Boulder Dash's* aspect of intrigue is that you create your own maze as you play, dictating the bad guys' routes.

Another thing to think about is the primal human element. There shouldn't only be villainous bombardment. There has to be some way of getting revenge, of being the hunter as well as the hunted. Can you imagine how much less popular *Pac-Man* would have been if you couldn't make the monsters temporarily turn blue?

There also has to be a measure of relief at intervals. You can't just hammer the player to death. Consider the easier waves sandwiched between the tough ones in *Robotron: 2084*, or the fact that you get a new world full of Humanoids every fifth wave in *Defender*. There has to be something to reach for, a light at the end of every tunnel. We do, after all, want the player to be motivated to play the game more than once.

Now it's time for the programmer in your mind to take over for the imaginer. But coding requires creativity of a sort; it's like fitting together pieces of a complex and yet nearly improvisational puzzle. **Everything** has to be thought-of: What happens if the player's character runs into a wall? How does the program check a bullet's screen position so that it can determine when the player is allowed to fire again? How is the illusion of screen-exiting orchestrated? How are two joystick directions combined to let the program know that the player intends to move his character diagonally?

After all of the routines are finally working properly, not to mention (here's the trick) working congruously with each other, then it's time to do the initial play-testing, during which you'll discover things that you didn't think of before. Uh-oh! What should happen when the score accumulates beyond its number of displayed digits? Why

does the gun's firing sound not ring out until a couple of seconds have passed after the bullet graphic left the gun? Why are all of the bad guys still in their "dying explosion" animation frames when the game ends and a new one is started without exiting the actual program?

Debugging isn't much fun, but once you figure out what's wrong and solve each problem, the result is very rewarding (okay, I admit it: You feel absolutely brilliant. And hey, I need all of that that I can get).

Once everything finally works, you start to think about extras -- additional spectacle. This doesn't sound very important, but little audio/visual details can make a game feel more exciting and satisfying. Can you imagine *Tempest* without the brilliant color flashes and cold, grating sound effects? Or *Doom* without the blood, for that matter? So maybe little, easy-to-program things could enhance our hypothetical game here. Something as simple as the walls flashing briefly every time the player shoots a bad guy can really enhance the overall atmosphere. Perhaps certain animated objects would benefit from a couple extra frames of animation. After all, if something doesn't look neat or mean to begin with, there's not much of a visceral reason to blow it up, now, is there?

Finally, after you're positive that there aren't any bugs and that all of the elements that you want are in place and interact correctly with each other, embarking on the third and final phase is unfortunately inevitable. This is the fine-tuning stage. It sometimes takes as long as the coding itself. Now that you've created a world, you're very, very picky about it. Either this alien or that key looks terrible being that color against this certain part of the background; or the bullets go

just a touch too slow, making the game too easy; or the main character looks awkward when he walks diagonally; or the bad guys don't home-in on the protagonist quickly enough to be obtrusive opponents (or, worse yet, they bump into each other more than they do anything else). Readjusting details like this, making sure the rest of the code will get along with this new information, re-saving the game (ALWAYS a good idea before execution, no matter what language you're using), and then repeating the process until everything looks and feels exactly as you want it to, can take forever. But once it's done -- Christ, what a feeling! You walk around with a sort of high. Because you've CREATED. You've succeeded at something that you've been working on for days or weeks, and now you're free of it, and something you've produced by yourself is now in the world.

Like anything, programming takes practice. But it's like riding a bike; you don't forget how to do it, because it's more of a knack than an encyclopedic knowledge. Anyone can learn to do it with motivation. Speaking personally, it's easier than Geometry or Chemistry.

It's really a science of its own, since it's greatly artistic. You become rather intimate with your code, crawling out of bed and into each new day with enthusiasm for getting on with the programming. You'll get overwhelmingly frustrated with a bug that you can't locate or a mechanic that you can't quite smooth out, vowing to give up -- and then the solution will come to you while you're trying to fall asleep or in the shower.

There are, inarguably, no rules for the creative side of it. Infinite new discoveries are out there, waiting. -- CF

# THE COMPLETE 2600 EASTER EGG ARCHIVE

by Chris Federico

**Y**ou think I'm kidding? Nope. They're all here -- that is, the ones I **know** of. I'm pretty sure that this is **all** of them, too. The reason they can all fit into one article is that without all of the tricks that deal with frying (turning the 2600's power off and on really fast) and other such error-evocations, which were **unintentional** on the parts of the programmers (separating them from genuine secrets as far as I'm concerned), they can be made quite compact and still adequately explanatory. So here we go -- plug in the VCS and get ready for a treasure hunt!

**ADVENTURE** -- The very first secret message, this is also the most involving coding-wise, the niftiest and the most rewarding. Warren Robinett had an extra bit of memory left over once the game was finished (5% of the allotted 4k of ROM), so he decided to add a whole extra room with his signature in it to get even with Atari's policy of not giving programmers individual credit for their games.

Select game variation 2 or 3. It helps to get the bat out of the way for this excursion, but it's not necessary; in game 2, you can grab him right away, bring him southeast into the catacombs, force him to grab the gold key, bring him back to the gold castle and force him to unlock it, dropping him inside and trapping

him for the duration of the game if he's flying diagonally upwards, straight up, straight left or straight right when you drop him.

Anyway, get inside the black castle with the bridge. Exit the bare anteroom, traveling north. Exit the screen above that, the first dark maze screen, through the top but bearing west. Once you're in the second, higher maze screen, work your way into the screen to the west, and then into the screen south of that one.

Have the bridge below you. Just to the south and east of the center, there's a little chamber that can't be accessed except by walking south over the bridge. Once you're in that little box, walk along the tiny eastern wall, simultaneously pushing that way, until you hear the sound indicating that you've picked something up. As you work your way back out of the castle, you'll notice that you've grabbed a dot. Robinett has said that it's only one pixel in size, deliberately seeming unimportant. But we know better!

The dot will be invisible in all of the rooms except the dark mazes, but you can see it by sticking it into a wall (just don't drop it there!). It can be dropped and re-taken, acting like all of the other objects except that the bat won't steal it and the magnet won't attract it. Bring it to the room that's one screen south and one east of the gold castle. Drop it anywhere in there. Bring enough objects into the room to make the eastern boundary line blink (the chalice often negates the line's new transparency, for some reason), and then walk through the line. There it is -- the biggest chunk of memory ever not referred-to in an instruction manual!

There's a lot of other neat secret stuff in this game. You can use the bridge to walk partway through a northern or southern

wall and see what room would be adjacent to the current one if there were a doorway. Once you win, you can hit the SELECT switch as the victory "song" is playing to hear it at half-pitch and half-tempo. Once you're back to the selection screen, push down on the joystick and see your hero appear in this numbered room!

**BUMP'N'JUMP** -- Whether it's intentional or not, being merciful in this M-Network game and not wiping anyone out results in an extra life and 50,000 bonus points after any course. SELECT also acts as a "Continue" switch!

**CARNIVAL** -- Steve Kitchen, brother of Garry (2600 Donkey Kong, 2600 Pressure Cooker, 8-bit GameMaker and others), made this home adaptation for Coleco. His message, an alternating two phrases featuring his signature, appears in place of the score instead of the first and second values that you can attain once you've flipped it. But this goes by really quickly, so try the easier way:

Turn on the 2600 with the fire button held down. You'll notice a little dot in the top row of targets. Shoot it before it scrolls off the screen, since you only get once chance. The game locks up, but Steve's egg alternates indefinitely.

**COMBAT** -- Here's one of the few mentionable "probably bugs" in this list: Hold down the fire button as you release the RESET switch. Now you can fire all the way across the screen.

**COMMUNIST MUTANTS FROM SPACE** -- This Starpath game contains Steven H. Landrum's initials. All you have to do is hold down the fire button as the game's loading from the SuperCharger and then look at

the high score.

**DEFENDER** -- Get to wave 25 (i.e. the wave after the number 24 is displayed) in any variation except the Mutants-only games. Rescue a Humanoid, but don't deposit him; fly to the height at which you start out (the 25th raster line, incidentally) and then look at the aliens. You can find the right height by watching the baddies blink briefly into different guises as you adjust your ship vertically. Once you're stationary on the correct raster line, they remain transformed; the initials stand for Bob Polaro.

**DESERT FALCON** -- Swim in the northern part of any lake while charged with a Superpower to see the programmer's initials.

**DRAGONSTOMPER** -- Yet another Steven H. Landrum creation for the SuperCharger. While the axe is onscreen, enter the command "Use shield" to see Landrum's initials.

**E.T.** -- Howard Scott Warshaw's eggs were almost as involving as Warren Robinett's invention. Choose the non-enemy variation to make this easy. Pick up seven Reese's Pieces but don't fall into any wells (you want to avoid the flower for now). Call Elliot and give him the pieces. Now find all three phone parts, still avoiding the flower (use the question mark icons). **Now** you want to find the flower. Get near it and try to make it bloom, and you'll see a character from another Warshaw game (look quickly!).

Get rescued, winning this round. Press the button to start your second adventure, and repeat the above procedure. Another non-**E.T.** character will pop out of the flower.

The third time, Warshaw's initials will replace the energy reading at the bottom. The

number near his initials in any of his egged games denotes the sequence in which he wrote the games.

**FATHOM** -- Rob Fulop was already notorious for egging games before he left Atari to join Imagic (see the *Missile Command* section). Here, he doesn't sign his initials; he displays Imagic's address! The catch: You have to rescue the mermaid seven times.

**G.I. JOE** -- Finding the currently untraceable initials in this unique Parker Brothers battle involves hitting the fifteenth Cobra eight times while playing the two-player, cooperative variation at its easiest level of difficulty.

**KABOOM** -- Scoring 10,000 changes the Mad Bomber's facial expression. He's shocked! Har. Serves him right.

**MISSILE COMMAND** -- Start a game on variation 13 and let all of your cities get demolished (as painful as this is to just sit and watch). Rob Fulop's initials will pop up from the rightmost city ruins following the game-ending explosion effects.

**MOUNTAIN KING** -- There's a whole extra series of platforms to explore in this CBS game (two, in fact -- see below). Get to the very top of the highest mountain and jump to the right, once shortly, landing on the same little platform, and then once far (the latter isn't possible without the former), getting as high as possible. Some ladders and platforms will appear in the sky. Now go back to the top and repeat the jumps, but here's the trick: Coming down from the first, shorter jump, you have to land on the rightmost edge of the platform, nearly missing it, before you bound off with your

longer jump. Again, stay as high as you can. Now you can catch one of the new ladders as you fall. Climb up and into a whole new game! (Granted, there isn't any scoring or quest-helping to be achieved up there, and some platforms disappear from under your feet...)

As if that weren't enough, there's **another** secret cluster of platforms. Go to the same highest mountain top and then drop to the platform below it, aligning yourself with the campfire above. Jump once to the left. If you were lined-up properly to begin with, you'll do an automatic long-long-jump upon landing and soar past a 4X4 group of tiny platforms hanging in midair. Hop as you hit the righthand pair; you'll jump up to a ladder. Climb up it and into the weird secret dimension.

**RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK** -- Another Warshaw character is revisited here, and again, you have to look quickly. Get a parachute and the Chai (the thing in the Treasure Room that looks like a pretzel). Use the Ankh to get to the Flying Saucer Mesa (the biggest), and then drop it and put the inventory selector on the Chai. It helps to have the parachute set up as the next inventory icon to the right. Run off the mesa and drop the Chai; now immediately open the parachute so you have time to glimpse the top of the screen, where the secret character is displayed until Indy falls past the mesa-side screen.

If you go on to win the game after initiating this egg, the final screen shows the Ark rising all the way to the top, revealing the maximum possible score and thus Warshaw's initials at the bottom.

**SPACE INVADERS** -- This is the second of the three "maybe bugs" I felt were worth bringing

up (see *Superman*, below, for the third). Hold down RESET as you turn on the Atari, and you'll get two simultaneous onscreen shots instead of one.

**STAMPEDE** -- Steer heads appear in place of the score if you flip it.

**SUPERMAN** -- Instead of starting the game by sending our hero down into the phone booth, hold down the fire button and push to the right, initiating X-Ray Vision. In early releases of the cart, once you do start the game properly after a couple seconds of this premature X-raying, Superman won't have to change into Clark Kent, the bridge will be intact, and three extra bridge pieces will be stacked over each other in the subway. You can even use them to build a new bridge over the old one if you're feeling saucy.

It's been a subject of debate: Should someone's high score (i.e. shortest time) be counted if he used this cheat? I say no.

**YARS' REVENGE** -- Shoot a Swirl in midair, and then on the explosion screen, line your Yar up so that the little see-through square shape in the middle of his body is aligned with the line marking the point where the Swirl was hit. Usually, the game will now lock up and ol' Howard's initials will replace the score, first frontwards and then backwards.

So there you have it! Anything I forgot should definitely be sent to me. These things have always fascinated me, and I sure hope they at least interest you, or you just wasted two pages of your life. -- CF

## TRON

Confessions Of a  
Young Obsessive  
by Chris Federico

**Y**ou want to know what I did over my summer vacation? C'mon, Teach'. It's 1982. Can't you people come up with something original?

Okay, fine. Here we go. My name is Chris. I'm 10 years old. I'm going to be your least attentive student this year. This is because the world around me has transformed itself. The concrete walls and tiled floors of Marie Hughes Elementary have become circuited corridors inside an electronic world I fly across instead of locker-lined hallways I walk down. My head is constantly filled with images from a new entertainment medium that's gotten into my psychological metabolism as if I were made for it: The Video Game. The monitors that connect my world to these new universes are not coin-op screens or television tubes; they're windows. These places may as well exist in our physical reality, as far as I'm concerned.

Places from stand-ups I have yet to master zoom past me as I walk by something as formerly mundane as a jungle gym (the *Tempest* tubes), a large playground sandbox (full of asteroids, of course) or even one of these awkward little desktops (the *Qix* playfield). Get my drift? I am not here. Here is dull. I hate being a little kid. I hate not being able to DO things, y'know? I want to explore this other universe for the rest of my life, because I'm the hero there. There, I can find things previously reserved to my imagination. I can DO things there.

In fact, I have a new thing I

want to do. I want to make video games. I want to be a programmer. This is because of *Tron*, a movie I saw over the summer that imbedded the Life-Is-a-Video-Game ethic into my mind even deeper as soon as I saw that a programmer could talk to one of his programs or game elements by typing something wonderfully mysterious and arcane like REQUEST ACCESS TO CLU45769 on an excitingly glowing screen. Can you relate to how COOL that is, Miz Educator? Or are you stuck in the textbooks?

Flynn, the main character, gets sucked into the collective digital world and gets to interact with the walking, talking programs that he and his friends created! WOW!

I've been sucked in myself, so when you smile, sweetheart, you're not the friendly teacher. I see behind that smile. You're sick of kids. I mean, you've GOTTA be, at your age. The main function of your kind seems to be to detract my attention away from the things I really love to fill my head with banal crap that will prepare me to be a good little drone. So that's not a real smile to me. No, you're that facetious King of the robots, Evil Otto. And you must be annihilated.

Sorry. I'll get hold of myself. I have this problem -- everything I see that revolves or spins in one way or another is the MCP from that film, and everything laid out in a grid fashion is one of the electronic surfaces that Flynn and Tron walk.

Why am I trying to get you to identify with any of this? Never mind, okay? I can't remember what I did this summer. Make something up. I don't care about the grade. We Star Commanders don't have to worry about things like grades. -- CF

# The Atari 5200 and ColecoVision:

## Whose Vision Was It, Anyway?

By Adam Trionfo

Let me get the joystick problem out of the way before I even begin to talk about these two machines. I am not very fond of either the ColecoVision's or the 5200's joystick controller. There is a basic understanding among gamers that the 5200 analog joysticks are among the worst ever constructed. The ColecoVision joysticks are just uncomfortable. I am not devoting any space to the joystick topic. I have taken care only to include discussion that will not be affected (directly) by joystick control. It is best to become intimate with a system's controller before criticizing the games because of lack of control. I have found that I can get the feel for any system's controller with patience. Patience is exactly what you will need to begin to enjoy either of these two controller types.

Considering their attempts at presenting technical specifications that were sure to impress even the most jaded gamer, Atari seemed to lose sight of the primary reason that people buy consoles and games: enjoyment. Does it really matter if the Intellivision controller had sixteen separate directions of movement? Atari thought so; the 5200 controller has 360 degrees of movement. The Intellivision

was able to store controllers on the unit. Does that matter? Who even puts the controllers back where they belong? Atari thought it was important, though; the 5200 has internal storage for two controllers, sacrificing size and practicality. Many of the games on the 5200 were direct ports from the Atari 8-bit lines. That was easy enough to do, since the 5200 was nothing more than a slightly modified Atari 400 computer in a new case with different ports.

If the 5200 had only to compete with the Intellivision, it would have been a very successful follow-up to the 2600, despite being incompatible with the VCS library of games (which was a big complaint against it). Mattel wasn't their chief competitor, though; on the scene with the 5200 was Coleco's ColecoVision. The 5200's hardware was superior to the ColecoVision's, but it is the software that has always mattered the most. Software was the 5200's greatest weakness upon introduction.

Games that were translated from the arcade to the Atari 2600 were bound to disappoint players if they were expecting an exact duplicate. Both the ColecoVision and the 5200 were much more capable of translating the arcade hits to the home consoles. Indeed, some of the games on each system are nearly identical to their arcade cousins; *Qix* for the Atari 5200 is a perfect example of this. It does illustrate another problem with both the ColecoVision and the 5200. Although both systems had some popular game titles, they both relied heavily on arcade sleepers for home conversion. Both systems have excellent translations of arcade games that were very good, but never were that popular. In reflection, this proved to be nice for game

enthusiasts who would never have been able to play these games at home otherwise.

The 5200 version of *Berzerk* is a good example of home translation. Like the arcade game, the home version speaks, using a sound chip on the cartridge ROM. I was never a big fan of this game until recently. There can be no comparison between this adaptation and the 2600 version. The ColecoVision didn't have *Berzerk*, but it did have its sequel, *Frenzy*. Both games are exceptional examples of the quality that these systems are capable of.

The 5200 has some noticeable advantages over Coleco's system. All games that involve scrolling look very choppy on the latter. For example, *Defender* on the ColecoVision compared to the 5200 version seems laughable. The 5200 version looks like the arcade game, with smooth scrolling and menacing game play. The ColecoVision version is jerky and the colors look bleak and unappealing. It is the smooth scrolling of the 5200 that makes many games far superior than the same titles on other systems.

In the end, neither the 5200 or the ColecoVision is actually better than the other. They both have an appealing library of games that both have some clear gems. If you are looking for one particular classic that was only made for one of these two systems, then your decision on which system you want has already been decided. If, on the other hand, you want the system that has some great addictive games then I would recommend that you get...both of them! -- AT



# An Introduction to Classic Atari Magazines

By Adam Trionfo

There is so much information available on the Internet that I sometimes forget that even one issue of *Compute!*'s *Gazette* or *Antic* contains more useful information than many of the Websites devoted to either the Commodore 64 or Atari computers. Back issues of these magazines are getting difficult to acquire, but they are worth the effort. For those of you who have heard of *Atari Age*, but never *Antic*, *Ahoy!*, *Compute!* or any of the other computer magazines, this article will serve as an overview of some of the more interesting magazines for the various systems.

Magazines specifically for the Atari 8-bit home computers include *Antic*, *ANALOG*, *Atari Connection* and *Current Notes*. There were others as well, but they were short-lived and not nearly as good as the four mentioned. This list does not include other magazines such as *Compute!* or *Softside*, which often included articles and programs for the Atari range of home computers among others.

*Antic* and *ANALOG* had the widest distribution among the Atari magazines. Like in most magazines from the first home computing era, there were articles included that dealt with programming. However, the main reason to get these magazines, it seemed at the time, was for the software. For an average price of three dollars, you could pick up an issue at the local bookstore that contained type-in programs that could be entered, most often in BASIC,

and saved to disk or cassette for later use. The programs required hours to type in and de-bug. The worst part of it wasn't the typing, but locating the mistakes apparent at runtime. There were many programs that I spent hours typing in but which never correctly ran, due to typos.

Eventually, most magazines adopted checksum programs that allowed listings to be entered with the risk of errors reduced. The way it worked was, at the end of each program line a comment with a number was compared with a number that appeared on the screen when you pressed ENTER. If these numbers differed, there was an error in that line. This took most of the frustration out of entering programs. The only thing left to do was devote the time required to actually type the listing -- Which brings up the cover-mounted disk.

Cover-mounted disks were introduced to eliminate the need to type in the programs. A disk issue usually cost about four times as much as its paper counterpart. It was well worth it, even if only one program was going to be entered. The time it saved outweighed the extra cash.

As the magazines evolved, so did the cover disks. They originally contained just the type-in programs, not utilizing the extra disk room. Most publishers utilized the space by combining three issues for one disk. But that meant that if you got a magazine that had a program you wanted, you might have to wait three months before the disk came out, even as a subscriber to the soft version. Eventually, though, the magazines began to provide a disk with each issue, which made more sense. The extra room was utilized for such things as menus and disk-only programs, which were often too large to be included as type-in programs in

the magazines themselves.

In hindsight, one of the best reasons to look through the classic magazines isn't the type-in programs, but rather the interesting articles. Some of them are very dated, while others are as fresh as if they had been written yesterday. All of them were very important at the time, though.

An article explaining how to use an outdated terminal program with an Atari 800 and a 300-baud modem to connect to CompuServe is hardly worth the reading effort anymore. But it was very useful when it was written. In comparison, an article explaining the basics of a display list in machine language for the same computer isn't going to diminish in applicability; it is still quite useful. Many of the techniques discussed are very clever and are unlikely to be found anywhere else. It makes these magazines invaluable.

But there is one more inclusion that I find interesting: the reviews and advertisements. Where else will you find the public's initial reaction to a new product? What did people think of the Atari 1200XL when it was released? For that matter, what did the reviewers think of the 1450XLD, a product that was never released? The only place where you can find the answers are in the pages of these old magazines.

But where can these magazines be purchased? That is the problem. They are very difficult to find. You might happen upon a few magazines at your favorite flea market or thrift store, especially if there is some classic computer lying nearby. If you would like a complete collection of them, it will require work and persistence to get them from friendly Internet users.

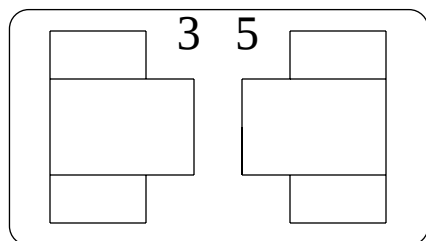
Good luck!

-- AT

# Little-Known Products

by Chris Federico and Adam Trionfo

COMBAT, for the Odyssey 2 -- We found this game to be excellent. The only problem is that you have very limited space for movement, as you can see in the following photographed screen shot:



As you can imagine, this makes dodging bullets especially difficult.

THE AMIGA SKIBOARD -- Before they revealed that they were actually in the electronics biz to manufacture computers, Amiga released several 2600-compatible controllers, including a palm-sized joystick and the wacky JoyBoard, a large, floor-based controller that required the user to stand on its side-ramps, tilting according to how he wanted his character to move.

Unearthed is a prototype for the SkiBoard, a pair of skis based in a T-bar that extends upward and holds two skiing poles. In order to play the game *Ski! Ski! Ski!*, the user would have been required to rake the poles across his floor in an alternating fashion, triggering small electronic contacts in the pole bases, while simultaneously sliding the skis backward and forward. The product was never released, apparently due to Amiga's worries that 2600 owners would complain about rips in their

living room carpets, not to mention the uncomfortably tight boots mounted on the skis (all size 8).

MICROSOFT BASIC FOR THE ATARI 2600 -- This product was completed in 1982 by the software giant that created the standard BASIC language for all 8-bit micros. Seeing the obvious limitations of the Atari 2600's version of BASIC, Microsoft wrote a much-improved version that took complete advantage of the 2600 hardware. There were a few reasons that this was not released.

The primary reason was that it required the user to upgrade the 2600 to include the following: 64k RAM, 360k 5 1/4" floppy, standard ASCII keyboard, and 10-meg hard drive. Microsoft was working on a hardware project codenamed The Super, Super, Really Good Supercharger. It would have included all of the hardware needed to run *Microsoft BASIC* on the Atari 2600, including *MS-DOS* and the original version of *Windows* (soon to be released as *Windows NT 5.0*).

Although the cost of the software was to be about average, \$399 retail, the cost of the extra hardware was to be quite a bit more -- \$5,999 without the hard drive, or \$8,999 with the drive (but no controller). Microsoft believed that many Atari users would be willing to pay for this upgrade. They may have been right, but due to the video game crash of the early eighties, *MS BASIC* has never been released - - which is a shame, since it really was a fine product.

There are rumors that much of the code for *Visual BASIC 6* is based on the final, but unreleased, version of *Microsoft BASIC* for the 2600. Microsoft did release a few copies to dealers in 1982 (on *MS-DOS* for

Atari-formatted disks), but no one at the time was able to run the software because the additional hardware was not yet available. The code eventually migrated to the Internet in 1995, thanks to the hard work of Kilgore Trout. However, no one has been able to run the software. Hopefully, Microsoft will release the required hardware soon at a reasonable price so that we may all enjoy this superior product.

LE' CAR -- Remember all of the "Le'" products that came out in the '80s? Video games weren't safe from that strange semantic trend. This game is basically *Night Driver* -- well, okay, it *is* *Night Driver*, code and all -- but the manual has been translated into French, which is so...y'know...*exotic*.

To work-in the fact that France is known for its topless beaches, a blocky rendering of the occasional bare-chested woman is passed as you zoom down the road. It can get frustrating; you might find yourself caught-up in the French motif, yelling "Le' shit! Le' shit!" when you crash.

NERF (TM) BOOMERANG JOYSTICK -- The only tube joystick ever made (thought to be as effective as tube amplifiers, and manufactured via a cooperative cross-over deal between Atari and Peavey), this Nerf (TM) controller was thought to be the solution for players who'd angrily throw their joysticks. Unfortunately, as the product was still quite heavy due to all of the internal circuitry, all play-testers were killed and the item never made the shelf.

THE GULLIBLE READER -- This is not a software or hardware product. It is the real name of the article that you are currently reading. -- OC&GS

# WINNING

by Chris Federico

**A**nd what's the point otherwise?

If you've been spending months/years/whatever wondering how to beat any of the following 2600 games, have I got a summertime present for **you**. I have 16 years of experience, trial-and-error and determined achievement (modest, ain't I?) collected under this paragraph, over the next few pages and at your service.

**ADVENTURE** -- You already know how to win, but here are a couple of tips to make that victory occur with less headache: The bat will be stuck in any castle if he's flying in a straight-up, diagonally up or straight-across direction. He can never deviate from whatever route he's on, inside or outside a castle, without locating an object to head for.

If you keep your cursor-guy pushing downward against any surface, a dragon can't swallow him. This goes for horizontal movement along the surface as well; just make sure to keep pushing downward at the same time you move.

Near the northwest corner of the second White Castle room (the screen right above the first section of orange maze) is a pathway that you can only access with the bridge. It leads to an area that you can't get to without the bridge. Sometimes the Chalice is in this hidden area.

For secret-room-finding, see the Easter egg article elsewhere in this issue.

**DARK CAVERNS** -- Having trouble leaving a level? Shoot every Spawner you see (the things that bad guys come out

of), because firing upgrades and level exits are hidden under them. Grab every key you spot, even if you have to walk around through another section to get to it.

**FATHOM** -- Just follow the directions listed below. The numbers are the level numbers. The characters are those who should get each succeeding piece of the Trident, **IN THAT ORDER**. You want your seagull to go upward from each denoted screen and collect clouds until he gets a Trident piece and can go back downward into the main, volcano-laden area. Therefore, "furthest screen to west" would mean before the furthest volcano, since you can't fly upward from volcano screens.

1: Dolphin - First piece  
Gull - One screen west of dolphin, then one screen east of dolphin

2: Dolphin - First piece  
Gull - 2'nd from furthest possible screen to west, then one screen east of dolphin

3: Dolphin - Just get the gull symbol  
Gull - 2'nd from furthest possible screen to west, then one screen west of dolphin, then one screen east of dolphin

4-onward: Dolphin - Just get the gull symbol  
Gull - Very furthest screen to west, then one screen west of volcano to dolphin's west, then one screen east of dolphin

**RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK** -- To see the two secrets, see the Easter egg article elsewhere in this issue.

Grab the whip. Go south to the Marketplace and get the grenade, the key and the Eyepiece to the Staff of Ra (the Staff itself is nowhere in the

game; the Eyepiece can only be attained after you've stood on either the grenade basket or the key basket for a little while. Buy the flute to make this easier; you don't have to worry about moving away from a basket to avoid the snake if the flute's playing).

Go back up to the Entrance Room and use the grenade to blow a hole in the eastern wall (make sure to exit to the south before it goes off!). Drop the flute if you have it, then exit through the hole. Grab the Timepiece in the next screen, the Temple Entrance. Exit to the southeast. There's no reason to venture into the Spider Room unless you've played for a long time and walls have been built over more practical doorways.

Whip your way out of the Dungeon cubicle and go east to the Treasure Room. What you want to get are two coin baskets and the Ankh. Use the Timepiece to help you figure out when the Ankh's going to appear; if the clock's pointing straight up or down, now's the time. Incidentally, the clock pointing straight left or right will make the Chai appear (it's normally used to bribe the Black Sheik in the Marketplace to take you instantly to the Black Market, but this is unnecessary in this particular solution process). The clock pointing in any diagonal direction will make the Hourglass appear.

The Hourglass is sort of like a manual Ankh -- you can make the grappling hook appear if you exit the Marketplace to the south, being sure to line yourself up so that you emerge onto a mesa instead of thin air, and you move the inventory's selector dot onto the Hourglass. The advantage it has over the Ankh is that you can de-select the Hourglass at any time, whereas the Ankh must be dropped if you want to get rid of the grappling hook and resume

normal movement. The disadvantage is that you can't just press the fire button to reappear on a mesa if you fall off, as you can with the Ankh.

Once you have the Ankh and two coin baskets, press the button while in the Room of the Shining Light (the screen with the Dungeon cubicles) while the selector dot's on the Ankh. You'll appear on the center mesa in the Mesa Field, grappling hook swinging around you. Make your way to the lowest centered mesa and drop the Ankh. Center yourself perfectly and walk south.

You're now on a very thin strip of ground. Don't walk off or you'll die; just head straight south. Put the selector dot on the key; as you walk past a point just south of center-screen, parallel with one of the blocks of color to your right, the Map Room will illuminate. Once you've found this spot, keep the selector dot on the key and walk right. Center yourself perfectly under the map, then take the selector dot off the key (but don't drop it). Remember, if you're not perfectly centered, you'll fall to your death as soon as the selector dot's no longer on the key. Also, at no spot under the map should you walk up or down, even when the key's selected. When you leave the narrow strip of land, you only want to walk straight across in order to center yourself under the map.

Once you're centered under the map, select the Timepiece and watch its clock-face. When it's pointing straight up, drop it and put the selector dot on the Eyepiece. The sun will now come up. You don't need the Timepiece, but it helps make the wait a little more tolerable. As long as you've now selected the Eyepiece, a little dot will flash somewhere on the map. This is a map of the Mesa Field; make a

note of which mesa contains the flashing dot, then drop the Eyepiece, put the selector dot on the key, and walk back onto the narrow vertical strip of ground.

Keep the dot on the key as you walk south. You don't need it anymore, but you now have to dash through a room of thieves, and if you accidentally touch one of them, all they'll get is your currently selected object. Head southward quickly, exiting through the southern border, a little to the east.

Now that you're amongst the Black Market, you can drop the key (unless a thief did take it). Use the two coin baskets to buy the shovel. Now exit to the east, just a little north of center. You'll appear back in the regular Marketplace.

Return to the Treasure Room. Remember to bring the whip along the way, in order to escape from the Dungeon cubicle. Grab the Timepiece to help out in getting the Ankh again. What you want to leave the Treasure Room with this time around is the Ankh and one coin basket. Return to the Marketplace and buy the parachute. Now use the Ankh to get to the Mesa Field again. Swing to the mesa that contained the flashing dot in the Map Room. Drop the Ankh, make sure the selector dot's on the parachute, and run off the side of the mesa!

Press the button quickly to open the parachute. Swing into the opening by getting the parachute caught on the branch. Timing is everything.

Once you're inside the mesa, drop the parachute and immediately run to the bottom of the screen, being careful not to let any of the thieves touch you and steal the shovel. Use the shovel to dig through the small pile of dirt at the bottom: Move back and forth along the pile at wide paces, pressing the button to dig each

time you cross the pile's center. Dig up that Ark, and behold! The title screen!

**RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX --** This solution is for game 3, the hardest. The objects all pertain as Temple offerings in the other variations, however, if you're just playing for score.

Dig until you get the Scepter, which will allow you to move really fast throughout the game no matter how thirsty or injured you are. If you dig up anything else, hit RESET.

Travel south (that's right) until you reach the southernmost oasis. Drink at it; you now have the Staff of Ra. (Staff of Ra? Which game are we playing here, anyway?!) You'll need this thing to give the Temple of Ra your remaining treasures at the north end of the desert, sending your score into orbit and winning the game.

Head north, with the Scepter selected for fast movement (unless you're digging as you go). Don't touch a bad guy, or he'll steal it. Get a shovel from one of the neutrals and dig for more treasures, giving up Scepter-speed for now. If he gives you something other than a shovel, just appeal to someone else, keeping the other thing. It'll come in handy later no matter what it is.

As you walk, drink at every oasis you encounter. It'll help you move at a reasonable pace when you decide to dig for stuff, or if anyone steals your Scepter and you have to dig for it again. Also, touch Isis (the blue lady) every time she shows up. Not only will she heal you, but most of the time, she'll give you a treasure you don't already have. Don't shoot her unless you want to lose points, and don't shoot or touch the bad god when he shows up -- but you knew that.

Keep it mind that drinking

from the Chalice relieves all of your thirst, like the Water Jug except it doesn't disappear when you use it. Utilizing the Medallion heals all of your wounds, but doesn't disappear like the Healing Leaf does. The reason that said items don't disappear is that they're treasures, while the Jug and the Leaf are just objects. Another handy non-treasure object is the Shield (protecting you from the baddies' rocks). Too bad you can't use two things at the same time!

Also keep in mind that no character in the game but yours can move northward. Whenever you walk southward, stay all the way to the west; this way, bad guys can't surprise you (or even shoot accurately at you as you pass).

Ignore the first Pyramid as you pass it. What you want by the time you approach the first Temple, the bird-shaped one, is the Healing Leaf (to be able to walk past this Temple) and the Scroll (for which the Temple will give you a key). Once you have the key, backtrack to the first Pyramid, open it with the key, and get one of the Tablets (the game's major treasures).

Walk north past the bird-Temple. The next Temple you'll encounter is the rectangular blue one. Give it the Water Jug (to be able to pass by) and the Crown (for which you'll receive another key). Walk north to the next Pyramid and use the key to get another Tablet.

The last Temple is the rectangular, fire-colored one. It wants the Shield (to let you through) and the thing that looks suspiciously like the *Raiders* Ankh (for the final key). To the north is the last Pyramid and the third Tablet.

Now you'll come upon the Sphinx. It wants one of the Tablets; it's always random, so

try each of them until one's accepted. Walk north to the Temple of Ra, select the Staff from your inventory and touch the Temple. It will take everything you're carrying that's a treasure as opposed to a mere object. Treasures are dug up or gifted by Isis; neutrals only give you regular objects. As we've seen, each Temple wants one treasure and one regular object except the first, which wants two regular objects.

Your score will increase for each treasure given to the Temple of Ra, and then the game will end. If you want to win **and** get a high score, just make sure you re-dig-up whatever treasures you've given away. This can get frustrating, as it takes a long time to find something when you're digging if you're already carrying most of the treasures. Another high-scoring strategy is to re-offer appropriate items, if you get them again, to Temples you've already passed.

SOLARIS -- There's a certain trail of quadrants (map screens) that you have to follow to find Solaris.

From your starting quadrant, go West, north, west, north, east, east, east or north, north, east, east and south. This is based on a map by Scott Stilphen that appeared in *2600 Connection* #8. For information on receiving that newsletter, e-mail Tim Duarte at [timdu@hotmail.com](mailto:timdu@hotmail.com).

Stop at every accessible enemy planet along the way. You get an extra life for rescuing all of the trapped good guys and blowing up the planet, and you need all the lives you can get for this trip. Stop at any accessible friendly planet to refuel. Remember that you leave a quadrant if you enter a sector next to the "doorway"; try not to get confused about why you've suddenly appeared in a quadrant

that you didn't want to enter.

The nastier aliens (Cobras, for instance) in the outer-space battles are easier to kill if you keep your ship moving constantly upward, holding it all the way to the left or right. The aliens get confused and keep wrapping below you. If you suddenly stop this movement and shoot at one, you'll get him before he gets you. But whether you place a successful shot or not, start moving in that weird manner again or someone'll get a bead on you!

On any planet surface, dodging enemies is always easier than trying to shoot them. In a corridor, reserve your lone two simultaneously allowed shots for one bug-eyed baddie: The first shot can be timed to shoot his bullet, and the second will take out the alien himself.

As you're entering a sector after a warp, and after you complete a battle, planets fly at you. Crashing into one will deplete your fuel (although they're harmless during an actual warp, when you have to line-up the two images of your ship to stay on target). Shoot any that pop up in front of your ship -- or, even better, play with two joysticks, so that after a battle you can simply press the fire button on the righthand controller and return to the map. Otherwise, the planets will fly at you for a few seconds before you're returned to the map.

So there they is. Hope this helped someone. Remember how to beat any game, whether it's essentially beatable or not: Have fun! If you're getting frustrated and angry, it's time for a different cartridge. You can always go back.

-- CF

## Perspectives On Gaming

By Adam Trionfo

The whole point of gaming for me has become sharing the experience. I could never go back to playing a one-player game that might take weeks to complete. Not only do I not have the time for such an ordeal, but it would not be as enjoyable as it once would have been.

Most players agree that the best games are multiplayer games. The more people competing, the better. A perfect example of this is Hudsonsoft's *Bomberman* series. It can be played alone, but is transformed into a death match with more players. Playing against four people (On the TurbografX-16) is an unbelievable experience. There is more to share than the actual game play itself, though.

One of the best lessons learned, and the partial reason for this article, is that a game that I would never have given a second look often turns out to be enjoyable -- a fact I might never have discovered if it weren't for our infamous co-editor, Chris Federico. He will put himself through the initial torture of playing a game, on any system, to discover what the "fun factor" is. There is a **reason** for which every game is released. Chris takes it upon himself to find that bit of fun in every game. This is where perspective comes into play. As an example of this, I am going to use 2600 *Berzerk*.

I never really liked *Berzerk*. It always struck me as having poor design. Hasn't anyone besides me questioned why the game is top-view but the players are seen from a side perspective? That doesn't make sense. Isn't it

stupid that if you run into the wall, you should die? The explanation is that the walls are electrified. Whatever. The game turned me off right away. I never gave it a chance beyond my initial first few plays. And by no means was this game helped by graphics on new systems. I did first see and play this game around 1983. I just never had an appreciation for it.

So when I picked up *Frenzy* for the ColecoVision, I knew that I would hate it. I plugged it in, had the same reaction as I did to the VCS version of the prequel, and never looked at it again. If you read this newsletter on a regular basis, you know that I recently gave *Frenzy* a very positive review. What was it that changed my mind; what was the new perspective?

Like I said, Chris has a wonderful way of deciding if he likes a game. He plays it! If he doesn't like it, he plays it again. If he still doesn't like it, he keeps playing it until he at least glimpses what keeps it from being fun. Sometimes, while torturing himself in this way, he discovers that the game actually has elements that shine through the badness. On very rare occasions, he finds that a game's bad elements are actually not so bad after all. Some of this has rubbed off on me. This is why I gave *Frenzy* another look after Chris insisted that it was a great game.

It turned out that he was right. The game is quite incredible. I never would have known this if my tunnel vision had not been expanded by another gamer's point of view. So now I have an obligation; I must go back through all those bad games and decide what is good about them! The task has proven much more enjoyable than I ever expected.

But Chris isn't the only one

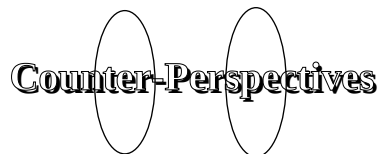
who has broadened my horizons. Who would ever think that Data Age could release a good game for the VCS? Not me, that is for certain. I had played the games that people have claimed began the downfall of the industry in the early eighties. Games like *Airlock* and *Journey: Escape* are perfect examples. Even after attempting *Airlock* under Chris's watchful eye, I was at a loss for words; no game could be this bad! So why is it that *Digital Press* says that one of the best games for the VCS is a Data Age game? Is it some kind of sick joke? I had to find out. I dug out the object of their praise: *Frankenstein's Monster*.

I had played the game before, but had given it, at best, five minutes of my life. If you are familiar with the Data Age label, you probably don't blame me. This time, I was looking for the entertaining elements. I was expecting to have to delve deeply in search of the fun factor. It didn't happen that way. I discovered quite quickly that *Frankenstein's Monster* is one of the best games for the 2600. I was amazed, and I felt just a bit stupid besides.

It was for the same reasons that I took another look at *Super Mario 64*. I had played it like mad the first day or two, thinking that it was incredible. But after gathering about fifteen stars, I was turned off by the difficulty caused by a 3-D environment. The game was well-designed and had great control, but I was finding myself in situations in which I could not see my character. I was usually dead before I had a chance to change the camera angle. I put the game aside. But was I missing the point? Very recently, I tried again. *Next Generation* did rate this game as the best of all-time. There had to be something I was missing.

I plugged it in and played some more. I gathered thirty-five stars before becoming frustrated for the same reasons as before: poor camera angles, plus my thumb slipping off the tiny analog controller just when I needed it there most. *Super Mario 64*, despite all of the contributions it has made to the industry is, at best, a mediocre game. It is a mediocre game I can enjoy, but nothing more than that.

The lesson learned is that every game player has a different perspective. If we try to see from an opposing point of view, we might discover a perspective that gives us heightened enjoyment of a game that we might otherwise pass over. But this is not always the case, as I learned with *Super Mario 64*. Every game needs some frustration; it is what makes a game addictive. But when frustrations obscure the goal of any game, entertainment, then no one's perspective, no matter how brilliant or deep, can change my view of a poor-quality game. But, to be masochistic, I will often try anyway! -- AT



By Chris Federico

**A**ctually, the only difference of opinion I'd like to offer concerns the first part of Adam's article. I don't like multiplayer games very much; I never have. Sure, I had a little brother to whip at *Combat* when I was younger; I could be persuaded into playing the other cannon in *Space Invaders* with a neighbor's kid. But my favorite games have always been isolated

experiences. I like being wrapped-up in a world that lies solely on my shoulders, and I don't like to share the experience with anyone. I can't get as involved when there's another X/Y and set of statistics to consider (the other player's).

For example, I love *Gauntlet* clones. What's kinda funny about that is that I've never played the coin-op *Gauntlet* itself. But Electronic Arts's *Demon Stalkers* on the Commodore 64, Atari's *Dark Chambers* for their 2600 and 7800, and others have always seemed to me to be logical post-enrollees in the school of *Adventure*, my favorite game of all-time. It's more fun for me to explore these worlds alone; I have them all to myself, I'm the hero, and I'm the center of the action.

When I first get a game for any system, I have more fun discovering its nooks and crannies alone than with someone else. I mean, I don't even like anyone to be in the **room**, man! I want to become enveloped in this new environment, because I can focus more passionately on it, feeling its thrills, more easily than if someone's there offering comments or lending support.

There **are** some games that are better with two people. It's just that they're never terribly good games, as far as I'm concerned. *Mario Bros.* and *Warlords* are simply made a little less dull and boring when Adam's playing simultaneously. *Artillery* clones are more fun with someone else in the other turret(s), but that's a different kind of game than an action or adventure outing. That necessitates strategy and pretty graphics, but no exploration or quick combat. Strategy games always indicate another person vs. a microchip anyway, whether they're already fun in one-person mode or not.

One rare case in which a great game continues to be great with another player is *Doom*. You can network two Atari Jaguars or Sony PlayStations and have each player's man wandering the same level, free to shoot at each other or utilize teamwork as they wish. When I first got *Doom* for the Jag, I had to explore it alone. Same with the PlayStation CDs. Adam probably thought I was a selfish weirdo. But now, one of the most fun things in the world is networking the game with him. We have a ball. We would easily play for days if we didn't have to sleep or work. That reminds me, Adam, we oughta do that again this week. It's been a while. It must be a gas for you to sneak up on me with the rocket launcher and blow me to pieces, considering that I'm addicted to the game and consider myself quite a guru-type.

It might stem from my initial fascination with 2600 *Adventure*, *Superman* and *Raiders Of the Lost Ark*; it might just be because I'm not the most social person in the world. Either way, I like playing alone more. At the most, I don't mind playing an alternating game, but we both have to be good. I don't wanna play for an hour and make the other poor person wait around for me to die. They might fall asleep on my console and drool all over it or something.

It's odd, now that I think about it; my other great love is music, and that's **much** more fun to play with other people. There's no feeling like it in the world. Well, maybe ambushing Adam in *Doom* and turning his poor soldier into ground beef with the chainsaw, or finally scoring one point against him in a game of *Warlords* (he's really, really good at that one). But for the most part, I'll go it alone. There's my two cents' worth. Pay and leave quickly, please. -- CF

# From the Mouths Of Babes

By Adam Trionfo and Dominic Lowhar

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**M**y son, Dominic, plays the classic systems at least as much as I do. He is the only four-year-old I know who, upon first playing Parker Brothers' *Gyruss*, compares it to Atari's *Tempest*. He has a gaming background that is nearly as vast as my own. Before he was old enough to hold a joystick, he was playing an *Arkanoid* clone on the Amiga called *Megaball* (with a bit of help from Mom -- or was it the other way around?).

While Dominic is playing a game, he is always explaining to me what is happening on the screen. He gets very excited about little effects. When playing *Berzerk* or *Frenzy*, I always overhear him saying, "Oh, no! The happy-face is coming!" Then he will say moments later, "This game is too hard for me!" The game then comes out and is replaced by another classic.

Playing video games with my son keeps the hobby fresh for me. He is able to offer a new perspective on games that I would not have without him. Chris and I become jaded with certain game-play, but Dominic is able to play most games with a fresh approach. The only problem with playing games with him is that most of the time, he beats me! (It's proof that game-play expertise is contained in the genes.)

Here, for reader examination, is what Dominic tells me about the games that he has been playing this morning.

These are the actual words he used. I have taken the liberty of placing them in paragraph format. Some of his statements might seem vague if you have not played the games in question. Not everything he says is accurate -- but from his perspective, it is all true. -- AT

**ANTARCTIC ADVENTURE** (ColecoVision) -- This is the penguin game. I like this game. I like the fishes. Did you know if you press "5," there is music? I like it when it makes sound. Make sure you get the flags. Jump over the holes, of course! I can't win this game; it is hard. You can jump over the holes if you want, because you can -- and you can climb out. When you get the flags, you can get points. When you get the flags, you don't die. -- DL

**BEAMRIDER** (ColecoVision) -- Now, about *Beamrider*: It is so fun for me because the joystick is kinda slow while you shoot. I don't know about the game. This is the bad guys' planet. When you beat the whole game, you have to go on your planet. When you get on your planet, you have to get some more bad guys. -- DL

## Mystique and the Wise Toddler

Gaming During Early Childhood  
by Chris Federico

**I**'m just not sure about the N-64 and PlayStation, or even the Sega; I'd like to be optimistic and assume that very young kids who started their game-playing careers during the "glossy system" era will, as they get older, hold dear to their hearts a mystique about, and fascination with, the first adventures they embarked upon -- like people our age are sentimental about 2600 games

and such. But we had to use our imaginations to create cerebrally tangible universes out of the abstract graphics, and since the games themselves had to be essentially excellent in order to render the simple pixelation incidental, it's the game-play we retain as we get older, a fascination with the circular stories themselves rather than any realistic worlds that serve as vicarious replacements for real-life activities.

But if little Jimmy walks into an arcade these days, he can see tons of machines with huge -- or, in some cases, practically panoramic -- screens, offering amazingly rendered auto races, flight simulations and skiing runs (complete with joyboards -- Amiga would be so proud). And glancing at the bedroom of the typical home gamer would reveal a PlayStation or a Nintendo-64, capable of presenting breathtaking 3-D landscapes. A PC in someone's cleared-away dining room/office would be showing one of the realistic *Myst* scenes.

Makes ya wonder, doesn't it? These people eventually have kids (if they're so inclined), and the kids grow up having no idea that there once existed video games that engaged the players' imaginations, contests that necessitated a lot more mental and psychological interaction and represented domains that were controlled by the kids who were playing, instead of the other way around.

Dominic is a rare case -- he's getting the best of both worlds. He's amazingly intelligent, and my eyeballs popped out the first time I saw him hit the correct combination of keys to play some Amiga game that Adam had set up. But I'll bet that in ten years, Dominic all but ignores the PC and Sega and plugs in *Beamrider*. -- CF



## THE OC&GS REVIEW PANEL

The 2600 programmers at Atari didn't hit their real technical peaks until three or four years had passed following the game industry crash. The '86 to '88 games even matched Activision's titles in quality, and in a couple cases actually surpassed them. What's unfortunate is that those later cartridges were hardly played, or even known-about at all, by anyone outside our community of fanatics.

Blame it on the release of the 5200 back in 1983, marking Atari's first failure to dominate the home industry; or attribute it to the 7800's terrible promotion once it did finally come out, and the Jaguar's lack of an extensive game library, both being finally fatal for the oldest programmable console corporation. However you see it, Atari's last contests for their first and most endearing system were released at a time when the company's death was imminent and they weren't trying very hard to sell anything.

So here it is: A trade-off series of commentaries on Atari's final 2600 games, those barely-known but ironically astonishing gems that didn't even get the chance to collect dust.

SOLARIS -- Doug Neubauer, the guy responsible for the revolutionary *Star Raiders* 8-bit original back in 1979, spent a couple of years getting this glorious, gargantuan space journey together, and every bit of his time and effort shows. Audio/visually, it's hands-down the most amazing game ever released for the 2600. Fortunately, the game-play itself follows suit; everything's optimally balanced, resulting in the mixture of strategy and action that Neubauer's first, more famous game attempted less successfully.

Certain early '80s carts revealed a chance given to the average game consumer to exploit his intelligence and involvement; programmers bestowed upon us games that you couldn't just plug'n'play. Unfortunately, the average gamer was like the average person in general: not willing to invest any mental enthusiasm in an object of entertainment. Therefore, *Superman*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T.*, Imagic's *Fathom* and the like didn't sell much compared to brainless blasters like Activision's admittedly gleaming *Megamania*. 1986's *Solaris* revealed a hope on Neubauer's part that if anyone actually found and bought his action/adventure, they'd finally be ready to read the manual thoroughly and challenge the Zylons with renewed vigor; 8-bit flight simulators had made their mark, and he evidently hoped that the required intellectual involvement would carry over to the 2600. Because, while it's easy enough to figure out if you read the instructions, it's not easy to beat.

We can only guess at how well *Solaris* would have done commercially if it had been given the chance. It probably would have sold well based on its graphics alone. As soon as you press the fire button and watch your ship launch at a dazzling speed over the impressively landscaped planet surface, you're hurtling through space, planets of different types and sizes zooming at you (and you can blast 'em!).

Here, there isn't just the one quadrant (i.e. scanner screen full of gridded sectors); there are 16! You can leave the map at one end and reappear in a totally new one. And you have an actual goal besides protecting your planets: Find Solaris, the main globe targeted by the baddies.

We do have the old windshield perspective here, but as opposed to *Star Raiders*, you're not looking out from the cockpit; you see your ship in front of you. In my opinion, it

works better. Photons still come out of both sides of your ship anyway, and it's much easier to aim at the undulating bad guys when your shots travel straight up instead of coming from the side borders. Granted, it wouldn't work for an 8-bit classic like *Elite*, but on the VCS it's left the programmer room for fine-tuned battle mechanics that make the space confrontations thrilling instead of marred by the tedium one associates with 2600 *Star Raiders*. Don't worry, it's not really like *Space Invaders*, in which you're at the bottom, firing upward; your shots go up and OUT, fading away at what would be the horizon if it weren't outer space.

The aliens are finely detailed and trickier than most other 2600 villains, even putting the horrors in Imagic's *Demon Attack* to shame. It's a very worthy series of opponents for even the best gamers, and we're supplied with a much wider range of differently acting and looking aliens to wipe out than in the prequel. Also, you can actually find the enemies once you're in an occupied sector; the computer works like it's supposed to, unlike in *Star Raiders*.

There are numerous elements added, all of them kept high-quality. There are wormholes that let you leap over route-blocking star clusters, corridors that look like *Tempest*-ish interstellar highways manned with one-eyed guardians that could be offspring of the Drelbs or the talking antagonist in *Space Fury* (you have to find a key and blow up the planet at the end of each corridor...talk about your engaging tangent!), surface battles as you challenge new types of aliens once they've landed and are threatening to blow up a friendly planet, enemy planets on which good guys wave at you, begging to be picked up (if you get 'em all, the planet blows up in a wondrous display of color recalling *Defender's Armageddon*), whole sectors made up of minefields, and little sub-aliens that suck your fuel

instead of damaging your ship.

All of these things are well-balanced, meticulously drawn, smoothly implemented, fast and furious. My only complaints: You can't leave the sector of a planet except by backtracking on the map, even if the far sector's clear. I'm not sure why he implemented this goofy idea into the admittedly maze-like scanner maps. Also, it would have been nice to have the aliens and planets set up randomly during every game, even if the maze of quadrants had to remain the same.

This is an essential game if you really want to witness what the 2600 is capable of with an enthusiastic programmer's brainwork and patience. The creator couldn't have done better. (Of course, we thought that about the first *Pitfall*...) -- CF

GRAVITAR -- This could very well be the most difficult game available for the 2600. It's enormous, comprising almost a dozen planets, each with a different layout and aesthetic theme. Some are easy, threatening only with hills and valleys; but some are actual mazes, making them almost impossible to navigate (and yet possible just the same...and what a feeling to get through them!). You have to boost your ship around with an *Asteroids*-like thruster to compensate for each surface's pulling gravity, and achieve the goal of wiping out all of the little bunkers on each planet.

For those not familiar with the original 1982 version, a multicolor Vector coin-op, the object is to visit several planets spread out over a few solar systems, destroying each by taking out all of the bunkers scattered along its surface (or platforms, as the case may be -- sometimes a bunker's situated on the underside of a big rock, hanging upside-down). If you don't want to visit any planets, you can directly attack the Alien Reactor Base of each system (called the Red Planet in the coin-op version), a screen

consisting of a spiral-shaped tunnel that's almost impossible to get through in the allotted time, considering the gravity that makes each wall pull you in. In the center of this base is the reactor (evidently imported from the *Surround* universe -- it's the only instance of boring graphics in the game); if you can blast it and get out in time, the current solar system is vanquished as if you'd blown up every planet, and you get to attempt the next system. Unfortunately, there's no neat explosion or anything when you achieve this. You just appear on the next level. I guess I'm being picky; the programmer couldn't have possibly had enough memory left to interject any further spectacle.

In fact, whoever designed this 1988 home version used every single byte to his utmost advantage. It's a huge game, with no mechanical compromises. At the beginning and after you've blown up a planet -- THIS rewards you with a nifty explosion, at least -- you're presented a full view of the current solar system, including the revisited killer sun from *Space War* that sucks you in if you're not careful (here, it's actually an animated, flaming sun, not a dot), the Alien Reactor Base, and the spread-out handful of planets that you have to visit. They're all shaped differently on this map view as well as up close. You can pick where to go. While you're trying to get close enough to a planet to attack it, the Alien Reactor Base is sending out ship after ship, and they fire at you in most variations. It's cool -- if you get close to one of these interplanetary jerks, you both enter your own screen and duel it out.

Once you get close to a planet, the screen zooms in on that surface (or maze, or series of canyons), and you get the WONDERFUL pleasure of fighting off frustrating gravity forces while trying to thrust around and shoot at the bunkers, which have accurate gunners themselves. If you decide to linger too long at the top,

reluctant to approach the merciless landscape, a little flying saucer comes out of one of the borders and tries to kill you.

The game is so gigantic because of the amount of different planets you can attack; every time you see a new landscape, you think, "Sheesh, they haven't run out of memory YET?" The mechanics are impeccable, featuring accurate bullet-collision detection (thankfully; the bunkers are hard enough to aim at). You have a neat tractor beam that allows you to quickly pick up fuel and thrust the hell away. The game play itself feels huge as well, because they made your ship really small to make the planet landscapes seem ominous.

The programmer made a brilliant move to compensate for the game's difficulty: He included a variation in which you get 100 ships. This is the only one I play; you often have to embark on a suicide run by thrusting at a bunker, blasting it or crashing into it, and saying "Damn the consequences." You see, you can't leave a planet until you've taken out all of its bunkers. This is not a game for temperamentals (including myself, although I thankfully have yet to pull the cart out and throw it at the wall). One kinder aspect is that it gets really funny, watching ship after ship crash. You don't really care in the 100-life variation; it's more than enough.

The main reason that the game's so hard is that the gravity centers are wonky on certain planets. Since the creator tried to give each and every surface or platform a gravity force, you're not sure which way you're about to be pulled. Another complaint is that the strength of the gravity seems to fluctuate, and at its strongest, your thruster is practically ineffective.

The 100-life variation makes up for this, so on balance, what we have is an excellent game. There's a neat twist four solar systems in: The gravity is reversed, so the planet

surfaces and medians actually repel your ship.

It's definitely a lot of fun to play. It's just really, REALLY not for little kids. -- CF

GRAVITAR -- I have never seen the arcade version, but I do know that it is a color, vectored game. I imagine that it would look similar to *Asteroids*. Smooth animation without clunky block-like graphics is a vectored game's specialty. Even when the Atari 2600 was extremely popular, it was never known to have fantastic screen resolution. *Gravitar* was a potential disaster waiting to happen on the 2600.

A large amount of screen area is needed to simulate the coin-op playfield. If the *Gravitar* ship had been larger, it would have ruined the home game's mechanics. Fortunately, though, the programmer found the perfect ratio between ship size and screen landscape. This places *Gravitar* past the first hurdle that could have pulled it down into mediocrity.

Controlling a miniature *Asteroids*-type ship through incredibly small crevices is very difficult. The option that gives you 100(!) ships makes a game that would be frustrating and far too hard into a game that is pleasant. Indeed, a smile wraps my face when my ship is used as a kamikaze weapon to destroy the gun turrets on a planet's surface. This 100-life option, combined with the well-designed screen ratio, smooth animation and great collision detection make this game very fun. Try it! -- AT

JR. PAC-MAN -- To start off irrelevantly, aren't you sick of seeing whichever Pac-person a game stars being drawn on the box, book and label with a friendly, happy face? Just once I'd like to see a Pac-simile frowning in demented anger, eyebrows lowered and jaws slaving for colorful-monster blood.

*Jr. Pac-Man* is, after all, one

mean mother-sequeller. He goes faster than any of his Pac-cestors, which makes the game a lot more fun. The faster the protagonist, as far as I'm concerned, the better. I play the hardest variation of any *Pac-Man* on any system for this very reason. Sure, the monsters go faster too, but it's not much harder if your synapses are firing well. This makes any *Jr. Pac-Man* my favorite over the prequels, because he's ALWAYS faster than his relatives (have you played the "Turbo" variation on the C-64 version? WOW!).

The mazes change like in *Ms. Pac-Man*, except they're more interesting because they're so big that they scroll. The scrolling is done smoothly, and there are no control compromises; I can't find a single flaw in this game. The monsters are actually smart (it's definitely the toughest Pac-daptation), the animation absolutely superb. There's just nothing wrong with the sparks in this double ROM, folks.

In fact, 2600 *Jr. Pac-Man* is, from my standpoint, the best home version of any Pac-game, barring maybe 7800 *Ms. Pac-Man*. There are enough different mazes, difficulty levels (whew...have a tossable coin handy) and varying strategies to keep this title incredibly longetive, not to mention the aesthetic fascination one holds for the scrolling and the unbelievably minute graphics and mechanics.

You can see the commercials, can't you? "Sorry about the first VCS *Pac-Man*. But really, buy this one. Come back to Atari and see what we have now. Please? It's not too late, is it?"

I'm gonna start crying if I go on. Get even with the first Pac-tridge on which you spent hours as a kid by acquiring this game however you can. You'll be astonished.

(H m m m . . . P a c - y a r d ?  
PacDonald's? Nope. I think I hit all the good ones.) -- CF

JR. PAC-MAN -- *Pac-Man* must be

the game with the most sequels. Although some modern games are closing-in fast (Squaresoft is working on *Final Fantasy VIII*), few games have as much variety from sequel to sequel as *Pac-Man*. The first *Pac-Man* only has one maze. Can you imagine that? But *Ms. Pac-Man* is completely different: It has four different mazes! In fact, each game is so unique in its own right that if the name *Pac-Man* wasn't contained within the titles and the characters weren't drawn in their same general shapes, it would be impossible to know that they were sequels to the simplistic *Pac-Man*.

*Jr. Pac-Man* is a perfect example of this. It is almost the complete opposite of *Pac-Man*! The maze scrolls! Game-play-wise, that erases any relation to the original!

*Jr. Pac-Man* is the best of the three *Pac-Man* games available for the VCS. The scrolling screen makes spotting the ghosts difficult, but this element actually makes the game more fun to play. The only reason that it seems difficult at first is because the player is accustomed to knowing where all four ghosts are at all times in every other *Pac-Man*. The change only takes a few plays to get used to. Careful watch of the movement of the ghosts while they are visible on the screen will allow the player to know the positions they are likely to be in when offscreen.

The essential game-play does not change in this version, but there are a few variations that make the game different, other than the already-mentioned scrolling. For example, the prizes now move around the screen and can destroy your Power Pills if they run into them. This is an added incentive to get the few extra points from a prize. They also change small dots into large dots, which are worth more points, but which slow down our hero as he eats them.

Every version of *Pac-Man* has that special quality that requires the player to get just one more dot, one more screen, one more ghost. The VCS version brings home the arcade

experience better than any other translation, including the unreleased 5200 version (which I played on an Atari 8-bit) and the poor Commodore 64 conversion. This game makes the original *Pac-Man* look even more pathetic. Even if you don't like *Pac-Man*, you must get this game just so that the first *Pac-Man* cartridge (which everyone owns -- admit it) is not the best VCS *Pac-Man* you own. -- AT

**DARK CHAMBERS** -- This is a fantastic game in both its 2600 and 7800 incarnations; the former is actually just as much fun as the latter. This is mainly due to the fact that they're two different games, both tailored for their respective systems and exploiting their different capabilities well. This says a lot about real programming skill (as opposed to that which bequeaths the scanned-in backgrounds in a PC game, for instance).

It's basically a *Gauntlet* clone, albeit an interesting one with enough differences to be unique. I can play this on the 2600 for hours; all said and done, it's *Adventure II*! There are, for instance, dozens of keys and doors, and you have to walk around blocky mazes full of little chambers, seeking the cleverly-hidden exit from each level. One type of enemy even flickers like the old dragons if there are enough things onscreen (hardly a shortcoming in this nostalgic context! Talk about mystique!). You can even reincarnate; after you die, the next game starts on the same level (good thing; there are 26). Granted, there are strength-updating foodstuffs and mere score-incrementing treasures instead of a bunch of useful, manipulative objects like in *Adventure*, but what's neat is that instead of a sword, there are firing-speed enhancers and firepower-ups. There's even an occasional smart bomb to find (and it's actually a bomb; no corny spells for *this* treasure-hunter!).

My only complaint is that your guy moves a little too slowly for the amount of exploration involved.

This is a must-play (just do yourself a favor and play the hardest variation), and it marks a fitting end to the 2600's legacy of multi-screen adventure games.

**KEY KIDS! FUN FACT** (although just barely related): Did you know that Warren Robinett named the *Adventure* dragons himself (Yorgle, Grundle and Rhindle), and, although it didn't appear in Steve Harding's manual for the game, Warren named the bat Knubberrub? It's true! WOW! -- CF

**DARK CHAMBERS** -- This is as good as Atari's *Gauntlet* ever was. I had thought that *Dark Chambers* was a complete clone, but it isn't.

The introduction is a very impressive title screen. Upon first seeing this, I thought that all of the memory that could have been used for the game itself had been wasted. Is the title screen really needed? Of course not. But *Dark Chambers* is one of the few 2600 games that has a title screen that doesn't intrude upon memory.

The Atari 2600 version of this game, unlike the 7800 one, is very different from *Gauntlet*. I imagine that it was the limitations of the VCS that made this necessary, but it makes for a better game. *Gauntlet*, while fun, is very trigger-happy. There are some places where there are countless enemies; you fire over and over again, with no relief in sight. 2600 *Dark Chambers* is nothing like that.

There are never more than a few enemies on the screen at once. When there are a few extra objects around the character, the screen begins to flicker somewhere around the magnitude of *Adventure*'s flickering (but nowhere near as bad as *Pac-Man*'s). The screen never becomes so full of flicker that the game-play suffers, though. The number of enemies was carefully planned so that this would not

happen.

The animation is well-drawn. While nothing stands out as fantastic, even for the VCS, the player can easily recognize and even presume what all of the sprites are supposed to be. The ghost, the skeleton, the key -- they are all drawn with enough detail to let a player know what everything on the screen is without reading the manual. The player's character is rather big -- not nearly as small as Pitfall Harry or the character in *Frankenstein's Monster*. The ratio between character size and room size is important -- it works well here.

The character moves about the chambers slowly. It hurts the game in the most minimal way. It is only worth mentioning because when there are no enemies or items in a room, it bogs down the game-play, because trudging through empty rooms gets boring quickly.

One of the most brilliant features of this game is the way in which player shots affect an enemy. Some enemies require several shots before they are destroyed. There had to be an easy way for the player to know how many more hits a creature could take. This could have been solved in many ways, a common method being that an enemy's color changes with each hit. Here, the enemies shift graphics from most-difficult-to-hit character to easiest-to-hit character. This is a great method to display enemy damage.

*Dark Chambers* is one of the best games in the 2600 library. It is a great example of what the hardware of the VCS is capable of. Chris thinks that this game is worthy of being the sequel to *Adventure*. I agree completely. *Dark Chambers* is a great game that deserves a place in everyone's collection. -- AT

**SEeya NEXT TIME!**